

Oral history interview with
Mary Edna Wilson
January 28, 1997
by Laurie Horn and Evelyn McClure

E: Mary Edna let's start talking about the earliest settlers in your family that settled in Sonoma County.

M: In Sonoma County?

E: You can go further back, did your family come from Europe?

M: Yes, from England.

E: What years, do you know that history?

M: I don't know that. And I don't know what part of England they came from but I know that my great-grandmother came across the Isthmus of Panama and she had a small daughter that was very blonde. I guess she did a lot of walking probably came on donkeys and walking and so forth and so the natives came out of the woods and saw this blonde child and were very...

E: Fascinated.

M: Oh absolutely and so they wanted to hold her probably scared the child to death. I have an old sword (I'll show you) they gave my great-grandmother as a gift.

E: Which side of the family was this?

M: Purrington. Then she was the maker of the first British hospital in San Francisco and the hospital as I was told was a ship pulled up on the beach or had beached itself and they used it as a hospital.

E: That's how the early bldgs in SF came to be along the waterfront. They just used the ship. Came to go to the gold fields and abandoned ship.

M: So then my great-grandfather was (this was Joseph Purrington) was a diver and he got on a ship in England and worked his way over to the US. He was only 16. They said he was a small man and he would do the diving. Now what they dove for, whether it was fish I never did ask anybody. Now why did they need a diver. We used to go to my grandfather's sister, Elizabeth Bryant in Green Valley and in one of her closets, it was a big old two story house, was a diver's helmet made of metal and had a glass plate in the front and screws on the shoulders. Us kids used to be fascinated to find that thing and try it on.

E: Did your great-grandmother move here, from San Francisco?

M: They came to Two Rock. My grandfather was born in Two Rock.

In fact I'm a fourth generation Sonoma County.

E: Joseph Purrington was your great-grandfather. What was his wife's name?

M: Frances.

E: Then their child, your grandfather what were their names?

M: My grandfather was Samuel Walter Purrington and grandmother was Hannah Louise (Miller) from Healdsburg. Her family came out by covered wagon. My grandmother used to tell us, my sister and I, stories when we'd go over and stay all night, she'd entertain us. The one thing that impressed me and stuck with me was she told when they were coming across the plains there was absolutely no wood or anything to build a fire with and they'd burn buffalo chips. I don't know why that fascinated me so but it did.

E: How long did you know your grandmother. How old were you?

M: My grandfather was killed in 1936. I guess it was closer to 1936 when I moved. We went up there in 1930 and stayed until 1936. He had an old truck that he hauled apples for the ranch out the other side of Graton. He had brought the apples in the truck. He parked it facing toward a building he owned that had belonged to my great-grandfather in fact and he stepped his leg over, we all had bumpers in those days. He stepped his leg over to be inside. He had to crank the truck. It didn't have a self starter. He went to crank it and had forgotten and left it in gear and it pushed him against the door of the building and killed him. So...I always laughed my grandfather would come down the hill at Graton and pull back on the wheel and say Whoa. He didn't remember he was driving a truck.

E: Your grandparents, their parents lived in Two Rock. But when your grandparents got married and settled they were living in Graton/Green Valley?

M: My great-grandfather owned all of Green Valley at one time. He divided that up between his children of which my grandfather was one. Another brother, Lincoln and his daughter still owns the property and lives there in Green Valley. I'm trying to think of her name...

L: Where were you born?

M: Outside of Santa Rosa in the hop fields, hop ranch that the folks owned. East of Santa Rosa.

E: Your grandparents were from the Graton area and raising apples?

M: As far as I know, I never tried to substantiate this but something that my folks told me along the way, my grandparents told me, I think my great-grandfather imported the first hop plants from England. Cause I found some old bill of

ladings, not that this says anything about this, but I found them in grandpa's things that he sent hops to England and .

E: Do you remember the dates on those?

M: No, I'm sure they got thrown away. After all these years. Too many movings. Course I was born in 1915. My grandparents grew hops before I was born, this was in Green Valley. I can remember that hop field then later a man by the name of Bertoloni bought the land I guess from Grandpa. Because there was a hop kiln there, but like most all hop kilns in the country they all burned down because they had, the way they dried hops was to have these big fires down on the bottom, they were two stories high and the floors were slats of wood and they put the hops on those and had big wooden rake type of things and kept turning them and turning them to dry and it was hot, had a big hot fire as things will go..(they'd burn) so that hop kiln burned down I know but then one thing my grandparents told me they little chimney sort of apparatus that was up above the hop kiln that my great-grandfather invented that and built that.

E: You probably saw hops being dried and all this was still going on when you were a young person.?

M: Not the picking of it. I had a lot of pictures of all that. But I don't remember the actual hop fields but I remember seeing the wagons, they would always drive em up to the second floor and then dump the hops out. I can't remember if they had a conveyor belt of just shoveled them in there.

E: They were whole vines ? They didn't separate them?

M: No, no, they were the pods. they look like tissue paper. Papery and thin little round circles. They come with a bunch. They would pick those off the vines. They would go out there. For a long time I had one of the wire baskets they, the sacks were tall, they were about 6 ft. tall and they'd put those in that wire rack and keep pulled em up I guess. Sew up the top, take them in the wagon. They weighed them, I found books where these people's names and so forth, to get paid. They talked about the hop fields-- were a place for some of the elite families of Santa Rosa to go out and have a vacation, they'd go out there and camp. And they'd have another space where the Indian folks came from Mendocino County and they would built a great big tule hut (I have a picture) that was like a meeting hut and would have that there at the ranch.

E: This was only during hop picking season?

M: Oh yes, just when they were working. I've got some pictures, I've got a fair collection of baskets that come from them, papoose baskets and others. My dad's sister, Edna, who I was named for, liked the Indians very much and was always going down there and they would let her take pictures, they wouldn't let lots of people take pictures but they would let her take pictures. She was very fond of them, we'd try to help them if the children were sick or anything. She was very friendly with them. Well let's see..

E: The hop drying, I guess we've talked about that.

M: Actually I as a child didn't , I was too young for that, in fact, the folks. the price of hops went down to nothing and they lost everything when I was two years old and we moved over by Santa Rosa. So I didn't grow up in hop fields at the place.

E: What did your grandmother do when your grandfather died in 1936?

M: She was just a housewife. Actually we lived outside of Sebastopol on High School Road and there were two houses on the property. Grandma moved over there and lived by herself but on our property and that way Mom and Dad could look out for her. She was with us but she was independent.

E: Did you have aunts and uncles? How many children were there that your grandparents had?

M: No, my aunt Edna died when, she was married, she'd gone to Texas. She died with TB I think. I can't remember.

E: So there was just your aunt and your father?

M: Yes just the two. I had two sisters, an older sister, Barbara, that was 3 years older than I and she died when she was 7 with diphtheria. My younger sister was 3 years younger than I. She lives up in Lake County now, Lucerne.

E: So there were just the three girls. What were your parents names?

M: My mother was Mary Hayward Teller and she was born in Alameda and grew up there. Dad was Joseph Miller Purrington, his mother's maiden name (middle name-Miller)

E: What did your parent's do for a living, they left the farm? and moved into Santa Rosa.

M: Dad lived on Olivet Rd., no that's where I was born. They lived out by Piner, someplace, they rented a house and he ran a ranch through my growing up years, dad did a lot of that, running someone's apple orchard. But then he also had a trucking business in town when we bought this house were we are now (7246 Bodega Ave., Sebastopol) He had a small trucking business he hauled sand and gravel and that type of thing for people here in town.

E: People seemed to do several different things to make ends meet.

M: It was necessary. You did what made some money and brought some groceries in.

E: So then they retired to this house?

M: They bought this house in 1936. Mr. Swain at the bank, let's see it's West America now, Laurie help me.

E: Was it the FNB of Sebastopol or the Bank of Sonoma County.

L/M: Bank of Sonoma County.

L: On the other side (101 S. Main) was the Bank of Italy when I was a little girl. (Later Bank of America)

M: No but the one of this side, Mr. Swain was the Pres., Harry Fuller was the VP. I never will forget this, Mr. Swain was a good friend of dad's and so one day when dad was down there he said Joe, I've had to repossess a house up here you know, I think you ought to buy it. I'll never forget coming to this house because we came up here and it looked horrible, the front porch was falling off, you couldn't walk up the stairs. It needed a roof, it needed a paint job and it had to have a foundation.

E: Who was the family that owned it before?

M: Gustafson was the name. So dad and mom, Mr. Swain said he'd loan him \$500 to paint it and put a roof on. Imagine \$500 to paint and put a roof on and build a foundation and built a 2 story garage in the back, all that on \$500. The price of the house was \$1200. They were sitting here and talking about these arrangements and so forth so they were just talking. Harry Fuller didn't sign anything for dad. I said Harry, I suppose I said Mr. Fuller, you know I think you should give dad something in writing. Of course he flared up and said Well Mary Edna don't you trust me, don't you take my word? And I said yes I trust you but I don't know that you won't walk out and get yourself killed crossing the street tonight and who knows about any of this? So they wrote something up for dad. I never will forget that he was surprised that I asked him anything like that. But then dad and mom put the new foundation under first, put the roof on then they painted the house. Dad redesigned this front porch. Used to be you went out the front door and down a narrow steps to the sidewalk. That's why the sidewalk is designed like it is. I put this other...up to the steps in front. But dad built the wide porch and wide steps at the landing which I always think was more attractive than those narrow steps. But we were always comfortable in this house. These are 12 ft. ceilings. The front had a wall removed. There were sliding doors here. Mom said I really would like those out so we have a nice big room. So they took those out. its so sunny, that's what I like about this house. Southern exposure. But the house stays wonderfully cool. (discussion about house)

E: We've covered pretty much on the other generations let's talk about your generation. Let's start with your childhood. You were living first of all on a ranch. Where did you go to grade school?

M: I went right up here to grammar school right above us. June Jones was my first grade school teacher and Hazel Henderson/Handerson was my second , Gladys Barnes was my third. June lived right down the street here, after I had our first child, I lived here with the folks, my husband was in the service, she used to stop every day when she came from school to see Nancy. Then I was married in 1940 and walked out of this house. And walked back into it, I can't remember what year I came back from Petaluma, it was about 1988-90.

E: How many children did you have?

M: I have two girls, one lived in Healdsburg, the other girls lives out of Roseville, which they now call Granite Bay. She's a school teacher, speech therapist. She went to college at Sac. State. The very first job she applied for was with Eldorado County and she still is at that same job. It must be getting close to 30 years now. My younger daughter lives in Healdsburg, she's a housewife and has two children. Nancy has two children too, a boy and a girl. Martha has a boy and a girl too.

E: Did you work outside the home during your young days?

M: Yes, when I was married I was employed at Speas Co., the cement warehouse (now the Sebastopol Cinema) it was a bonded warehouse, distillery. They used all the apple peels from all the apple dryers around the county. The company had little dump trucks they sent out to all the apple dryers and brought the peelings in and then they would put them into a big, it was like a big sheet of porous sacking and they would put them in presses, the juice would flow out into pans and they squeezed those down. There were wooden racks, separated pieces of wood, slats, they would pile those up more than one on those racks of apple peelings and put the sides up and would put pressure on and the juice would come out. Then they went to "pans" over a fire and they cooked it. Then they made apple wine and apple brandy and an apple concentrate. The main office of the company was in St. Louis, MO. A lot of that was shipped all over the United States. I worked in the office with Mary Sexton, my close girlfriend, we've been friends since we were 4. Even after I was married I continued to work there. After that I went to Petaluma, my husband got a job there with the Ford Motor Co., he was office manager, after the war when he came home in 1945.

E: Was he in the Army or Navy?

M: Navy. He was a radar technician and in the Air Force and worked on planes. He used to laugh and say they changed those so fast that they were obsolete before they could learn how to fix it.

E: What was his first name?

M: Earl, actually he was J. Earl -- John Earl but it was very strange with his whole family, everybody went by their second name. His brother was Daryl and it was William Daryl.

E: Where are they from:

M: He was born right out here on Wilson Road. two miles west of town.

E: Oh, the historic Wilson family.

M: There's another Earl Wilson on Burnside Rd. but no relation. Just mixed up the mailman. The first Christmas when we got married, so many people in those days would address an envelope, Earl Wilson, Sebastopol. The mailman I guess would pitch one one way and one the other. If I got an envelope and I opened it and didn't recognize the name I'd ask Earl does this name mean anything to you?. If he'd say no, I'd put it in a corner and I'd talk to Estelle Wilson and say we've got some mail for you and she'd say yes we have some mail for you (too). We'd meet each other and change. That went on the first couple years we were married. We lived up on Fircrest and got an address and people started addressing us at that address, it was better.

E: After the war...

M: We went to Petaluma, Earl got a job. I began to look for a house, I thought we'd rent, that was a joke. There weren't any houses to rent. Finally I looked to see if there was something to buy, we found a little 2 bedroom on Hill Blvd. Earl's mother and brother helped us put a down payment on. We lived there 45 years. After Earl passed away. When we first moved there Earl got a job with the Pontiac dealer in the office. Then Mr. Page the owner passed away then he got a job at the Ford garage. He was 12 with Page and 16 with Ford. Then I got interested, a friend said why don't you take a course in real estate. I was looking around, I really wanted to find a place in the country I was looking around so much I got to be pretty good friends with a real estate agent. He said we're going to start a class for real estate agents, why don't you come down? I said I don't have time to do that. My family and everything. I was taking a course in flower show judging, I'm a nationally accredited flower show judge now. I was in the midst of getting my credentials for that, you had to go to school, go to symposiums, go to classes and take tests to get credentials. I said I can't start something else. But he said we're not going to do this again, so I found myself starting in real estate. One time, we were sitting by the fireplace and I was studying away having a hard time with it, it was difficult. Earl said why don't you just forget that stuff, you'll never make a dime. Years later as I became more successful. He said go ahead beat me with that long green stuff I don't care. That was a joke we had between us. Both of us were pretty humorous and didn't take things too seriously. We had a good life for 45 years. I stayed in real estate 30 years.

E: Did you sell around Petaluma?

M: Yes, totally around Petaluma. I sold ranches and houses, businesses.

E: You must have seen the beginning of the boom in Petaluma, the growth?

M: Oh yes I saw the time if a house came up for sale, you would get 3 or 4 offers, if it was your listing, and some would be more than the listed price. It was hectic. It wasn't fun. Most of my real estate life I enjoyed it. When it was so competitive I didn't. Then all the Realtors in Petaluma were very friendly to one another, were very honest and good with each other. They wouldn't try to steal your client or anything. Then growth and everything, some real estate companies from Marin decided to come up to Petaluma and that spoiled everything for us. They introduced a lot of competitive methods they didn't trust anybody, it made a whole different world out of the business. I felt I lived in the best time when we enjoyed each other and worked together. I can remember one time, Hansen Bros. were in business then. I thought very highly of the one brother, I called him one day and said I've got a client that wants this kind of a house, and he said oh I've got one Mary Edna, I haven't got it listed yet but you can go ahead and show it. He trusted me to go ahead and work on it. He trusted me to right by him and I did. I thought that was a wonderful thing for him to do. It's not that way anymore.

E: Have you kept up with flower judging?

M: Yes. E: Is it a specific flower or ?

M: No everything, shrubs, trees, flowers. We have symposiums every couple years. They will feature a different flower each time. There's one coming up in March there's going to be rhododendrons.

E: Where do they hold these?

M: Down the peninsula. This one's going to be in Sacramento. I've gone to San Diego. It has to be someplace that's pretty good size.

LH: Just statewide?

M: Well actually the US. I belong to a group in SF that's called Founders Council of Judges. I go there once a month to meetings and we feature also someone to talk about a certain flower or judging points to keep us on our toes. You have to enter displays, 2 in flower arrangements and 2 in specimens every 2 years. I'm just about to the place I haven't had a chance to enter something in a flower show so I don't have my sheets signed to go to this next symposium. You don't have to grow them yourselves for arrangements. For a specimen you have to have grown it and had it in your possession for awhile. You can't go out and buy something from a nursery. So this may be the year I give it up. Right now I have invitations to judge at the Marin-Sonoma Fair and I have one to go up to in the Gold Country. (more discussion on flower judging) Wentt has a good show. One rosarian there grows roses for Jackson-Perkins, he's so good.

E: For specimens, do a lot of people do hybridizing ?

M: Oh yes, one man I knew in Arcata. He grew lilies. He hybridized begonias. There's one he propagated that got away from him and a company made thousands of dollars (on it). (a Lily, called Stargazer. Laurie said she raises it)

(more discussion on judging)

E: Why don't we go back to your days in Sebastopol?

M: Before we were married two years he was drawn into the war because the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. I never will forget he was planting daffodils that day, out the kitchen window. I had the radio on and was cleaning up breakfast things, all of a sudden they said Pearl Harbor'd been bombed. I flipped the window up and said the Japanese have just bombed Pearl Harbor. He said you must be crazy? I said come in and listen.

E: How old was your husband at that time?

M: He was 27 when we married, I was 25. When he went into the service the younger fellows called him the old man in this group he was in.

E: They were probably teenagers?

M: Yes. E: But you didn't have any children yet?

M: No. Nancy was born in '44 and Martha in '52. We went to Stillwater, OK. That's where they sent him to school. First he went to Treasure Island then to Oklahoma.

E: And you went with?

M: Later, The people next door, their name was Turley, and they owned the bakery here in town. They had a son in Texas. They wanted to see him, so I said how about riding with you. Then the Chiaroni's, Dan and Eileen (sp?) They had their son back there too, so we all drove in a car together. I never will forget going through the Panhandle, that is the most desolate country. Texas, I say has no trees and no hills (people say I'm wrong) It's flat nothing.

E: You went through Arizona and New Mexico to get to Texas?

M: Yes because we went by the Grand Canyon, I remember. That's all we did was stick our nose over and leave.

E: How long did you stay in Oklahoma?

M: 3 months. The Turleys went on to their family on OK, that's where they were from. I stayed in a hotel by myself for the first time in my life. I walked into the room and lifted the sheets, because they talk about having bed bugs. Then I saw a cockroach and I'd never seen a cockroach. I didn't sleep that night. I was afraid I was going to miss my bus, I was going on to Stillwater. Earl took 3

months of college at Oklahoma A&M which was equal to 2 years of college. they took math and everything, his radar course. They would have a test every Friday night. and if they didn't pass it he would lose his rating and be busted to seaman and sent to Louisiana and be shipped out. So there was pressure to pass the class.

E: Where were they going to send him when he was done with this training?

M: He was sent to Alameda Air Base. From Oklahoma we went to Corpus Christie, Texas, The Air Force base there. He was there 6 months going to school.

E: You stayed there all that time?

M: Yes, I finally we had to go in with another couple to find housing. All there were in Corpus Christi were fishing shacks, single wall, the heaters had no thermostats and if you tried to leave them on at night the gas would fluctuate and might go out so you didn't dare do anything like that. We put our name in for Navy housing and we went in with another couple, there was a 6 months waiting list. Of course I had no furniture. I've laughed to this day about our furniture. A Navy officer got the apt. next to us. They were from NY, a little older couple but nice. The Navy had boxed all their possessions. I can remember one flat box that was about 4 ft. square and 6 or 8 inches deep. I turned that up on its end put some oil cloth curtains in the front, little curtain rod across the front. Scalloped the edge and that was my bookcase or something to hold pots and pans. We bought a couch that made into a bed for the living room and I guess a chair. The other couple had a couple things too, so we combined our things and used these box crates. We had friends, from Stillwater, they came to Corpus Christi. We (the women) would get together and sew (while they men were in evening classes) and sometimes we'd have pot lucks. No one had enough chairs for everybody so if you went you had to take a chair with you.

M: Earl was shipped to San Diego/Coronado. I got to ride on a troop train all the way from Texas. Which was most unusual. 5 or 6 of us wives got to come on the troop train. We didn't have any air conditioning and it was so hot. I remember in San Antonio, TX we had to wait a couple hours, it was so hot you couldn't put your hand on the railing to get off the train. Our friends, Wes and Jo Smith, the train stopped and we said let's see if we can find a store with ice cream. Wes and I headed down through the brush, we could see some lights. We found a quart of ice cream and were headed back to the train when an MP stopped us "That's a troop train, you can't get on there" I said, You watch me. I got off there and I'm getting back on. I just kept going. They weren't going to leave me in the middle of nowhere.

E: Did you stay in San Diego also?

M: Coronado. We couldn't find any housing there either. This same Wes Smith looked around. Someone he knew told him they're moving out. It was a house, a big old house, and this woman would rent each one of her bedrooms. We

shared a bathroom with 6 WAVES downstairs. And there was another couple, Navy officer, wife and little boy lived downstairs in a little apt. There were 4 of us upstairs that just each had a bedroom. We would have to come out of the house walk downstairs into the basement and she had a fourburner gas stove, that's what we cooked on, all of us. We had a cement wash tray, not a sink. We didn't have any cupboards, we got orange crates and piled those up to put groceries in. But we got along.

E: Did everyone cook individually or ?

M: Yes, individually. I said after awhile that's terrible. One night I said I'm going to make an apple pie, does someone want to buy ice cream, we'll have dessert. and We had dessert together and we got so we would do that more. I remember there was one couple from Brookline, MA and they weren't used to ever being friendly with anybody. They don't speak to their neighbors, that sort of thing. We got together and did things, it was much more pleasant. We stayed there until Christmas. I was thrilled, Poinsettias were up to the eaves of the houses and it was gorgeous. We got up the next morning we'd had this frost and everything was killed. We stayed there from the 4th of July to Christmas. I worked for the Hotel Del Coronado in the laundry office. I used to go and eat lunch at the Hotel with the help everyday.

E: How long did you work there. They had a lot of famous people visiting did you get to see?

M: No you ate in the basement and worked in the laundry office. I didn't mix with those kind of people. I came to Sebastopol, our car was in storage. I got the car for transportation. A girl here, her husband was there, so she rode with me to San Diego. My friend Mary Sexton was getting married, I came back to be bridesmaid, Earl was being shipped out that's when I came back up here. My folks were living in this house and I moved back with them. My parents lived in Fort Bragg for awhile, dad drove truck, drove the stage/bus. Nancy was born up there in what is now a bed and breakfast, it was a hospital. (In Fort Bragg) The Grey Whale. That was in '44. We didn't have telephones, Earl had called my sister who had one. Her husband was in the merchant marine, she could get a phone. She came up one night, she was all excited, "Earl's coming home" I thought she was kidding and said I don't think you're very funny. He was going to meet me at the bus depot in Petaluma. Nancy was 3 months old before Earl saw her. He was discharged later, I went to Livermore to get him.

E: With rationing and things how did you manage?

M: You didn't have gasoline, had to have meat stamps. it was very hard to get gas.

E: Did your parents have a garden?

M: Dad grew vegetables here in back. I remember the night Skeet said Earl's coming home. Over here in the park they had a big space where people could

use land to grow vegetables and Dad and I had planted a whole section of potatoes. I was just pooped that night. It was late, about 11 pm.

E: What did people grow in Victory Gardens?

M: Just the normal. Tomatoes. Well we planted potatoes. I don't remember we planted other things, maybe we had that up herein back.

E: Do you still have an extensive garden yourself here?

M: I don't have as much as I used to. I'm just too tired. I don't grow vegetables. But I do like to keep some of my flowers. Flowering quince is about all I have in front, and snowdrops.

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